

Mexico's Transplanted Millionaires

Refugees of Peso Devaluations, They Find Haven in La Jolla

By LAWRENCE A. HERZOG

SAN DIEGO—A new wave of Mexican migrants is redefining the Latino presence in San Diego, America's largest border city. These migrants travel no farther north than here. You won't find them in the steamy kitchens of restaurants in Mission Valley. Nor are they headed toward the dilapidated workers' camps around North County's avocado groves. The new immigrants are at home strolling along elegant Prospect Street, wearing opulent jewelry and European fashions. They are Mexico's transplanted millionaires.

San Diego is becoming the West Coast Miami. Just as Florida attracted Cubans fleeing revolution in the 1960s, then South and Central Americans waiting out war or economic chaos, San Diego is the city of choice for thousands of Mexican millionaires, economic exiles fleeing a nation in debt. By 1985 it was reported that \$12 billion had left Mexico for U.S. banks, and Mexican nationals held more than \$55 million in assets in the United States, mainly in Southern California and Texas.

Most of San Diego's rich Mexican immigrants have come since 1982, the refugees of peso devaluations. Lawyers, bankers, architects, businessmen and politicians from Mexico's largest cities—Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey—they share a resolve to protect their life's income.

In a study published by UC San Diego's Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, author Valdemar de Murguía found that climate and the quality of life, along with business opportunities and social networks, were the main reasons a sample of wealthy Mexicans gave for choosing San Diego as their destination.

Murguía also found that the new immigrants had brought considerable wealth into the city—\$3 billion between 1976 and 1985, he estimated. Some of it was immediately invested in real estate, restaurants, bars, retail stores, hotels and construction ventures.

In La Jolla, Murguía found Mexican millionaires living in palatial homes. "Some," he described in his 1986 report, "have as many as seven bedrooms, none less than three. Many have Greek statues, marble floors and columns, Roman-style pools and extravagantly decorated interiors that include art collections worth \$1 million or more."

Since the devaluations in the early 1980s, Mexicans have been clamoring to find new ways to shelter their income in Southern California. Many have opted for securities. One broker at Merrill Lynch estimated that he handles about \$20 million in Mexicans' securities investments. Some of this buying is done simply because "it's the in-thing to do," according to Ed Oleata at Merrill Lynch. "A lot of Mexicans lost money in the condominium market and switched over to securities," he said.

It is tempting to imagine that this migration of millionaires will signal the



beginning of a more powerful Latino presence in Southern California. So far, however, this social group has remained invisible, a tight-knit, closed community. The new Mexicans tend to live in isolated, guarded enclaves that remind them of the high security and exclusivity of their homes in Mexico City.

"As a rule the Mexican upper classes in Southern California are quiet. They are a hard group to approach," said Eduardo Nieto, an interior designer from La Jolla.

One reason the Mexicans haven't mixed with their North American neighbors is language. Many never learn English, and they don't think their culture mixes very well with that of the United States.

Surprisingly, Mexican-Americans in the San Diego area have had a surprisingly low profile politically, in contrast to the strong Chicano presence in Texas' major border cities—El Paso, San Antonio, Laredo. In the past decade, only three Mexican-Americans have served on the San Diego City Council. In the heavily Chicano communities south of here, only one Latino has ever served on the city council in National City or Chula Vista.

Could it be that the new wave of Mexican millionaires settling permanently in San Diego will bring a new political and economic force into the fold? No, says Tony Valencia, director of the Mexican and American Foundation, a business-oriented Chicano organization. "Ancestry is the only thing we have in common. We have totally different agendas," he said.

The subject of Mexican millionaires seems to evoke a current of anger and hostility among San Diego's Mexican-Americans. "If anyone is taking over and making political strides, it's the Chicanos... yet who's going to benefit? The Mexicanos. And who's going to be put on

the line? The Chicanos," said Remigia Bermudez, former Latino-affairs adviser to the mayor of San Diego, now a member of the city's Planning Department. "We are never mentioned, never talked about, never brought up (among wealthy Mexicans). I don't know one major Chicano leader in this town who has contact with them," stated Alfredo Velasco, a Chicano anthropologist who directs a community center near downtown.

It may be a matter of social class. "To identify with Chicanos is a step down," said Velasco. "Here society is based on race; where they come from, it is based on economics," observed Irma Castro of the Chicano Federation.

But among rich Mexicans there is also a sense that perhaps politics Chicano-style has not worked. The Mexican and American Foundation is looked down on by many in the Mexican community, as is the Chicano Federation. "They create an oasis in the middle of the desert and declare themselves king of the oasis," said Diana Gomez, herself a wealthy Mexican immigrant.

What may be happening is that two or more oases are forming: Older Mexicans. Young Chicanos. Wealthy Mexicans. Poor Mexicans. Can these seemingly disparate forces come together? When Linda Ronstadt brought her Mexican ancestry to San Diego recently to sing her "Canciones de Mi Padre" (Songs of My Father), the theater was filled with Latinos of all backgrounds. Here was the new Latino melting pot at its best. "Culture unites the people," said Gomez. But can it be translated into power?

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